Letters . . .

ON THE ROAD TO TCHEPONE

To the Editor—John Collins has done both aficionados and students of the Vietnam War a favor by discussing the operational considerations involved in blocking the Ho Chi Minh Trail in "Going to Tchepone: OPLAN El Paso" (*JFQ*, Autumn/Winter 97–98). But there is a sequel to his account. Westmoreland had the opportunity to go into Laos, but America lacked the political will.

While preparing to conduct Operation Pegasus (the relief of Khe Sanh) in March 1968, the 1st Cavalry Division got another mission: destroy those remnants of the North Vietnamese forces in the A Shau Valley that had attacked Hue during the Tet offensive. At the time, I was a district advisor in Khe Sanh attached to the division to support planning for Operation Pegasus. On April 1, 1968 the division plans officer, Major Paul Schwartz, started to brief a much less difficult concept than OPLAN El Paso for an attack into the A Shau Valley to General John Tolson, commanding general of 1st Cavalry. The plan was to attack along Route 9 and to continue beyond Khe Sanh into Laos, leapfrog south along the Ho Chi Minh trail, block and destroy it, and then enter the valley from the north. Once inside Laos the division (+) would conduct a rear-guard action while attacking towards Hue. We thought that at the least strategic surprise could be attained. At the time, a major factor was the supplies that had been stockpiled at Khe Sanh to enable it to survive the siege (60+ days). We thought the division could draw down the supplies instead of hauling them down highway 9, as eventually happened. We planned to temporarily block/destroy the trail and later shift the supply base to the coast which was possible because of an extensive use of airmobility assets to resupply. A ground line of communications would not be needed while we were in Laos. In addition, almost an entire corps was in place, including elements of the 4th and 26th Marine Regiments, 1st Cavalry Division, a South Vietnamese airborne brigade, and a special operations battalion-equivalent (from Special Operations Group Forward Operating Base 3), as well as extensive artillery, logistical, and engineer augmentation.

Tolson quickly dismissed the concept and asked if we had heard the speech that President Johnson had given the previous night in which he announced a partial bombing halt. We had not. "What you are proposing is not politically feasible," Tolson said. He then turned and left.

This was a classic case of applying political constraints on operations in Vietnam. We will never know if the losses incurred during Operation Lam Son 719A (as Collins noted) may have been avoided and the war shortened if an attack into the A Shau Valley had been deemed feasible. It underscores the necessity to establish political and military objectives before a conflict begins.

—COL Bruce B.G. Clarke, USA (Ret.)
Topeka, Kansas

CRIMPED WINGS

To the Editor—In his provocative two-part article on "Military Innovation and Carrier Aviation" (*JFQ*, Summer 97 and Autumn/Winter 97–98), Jan van Tol makes a significant contribution to the literature on systems acquisition and force structure. But while there is much merit in his analysis, it is not accurate to declare that "the Royal Air Force crimped naval aviation efforts from the start by removing aircraft and naval aviators from the control of the Royal Navy." During World War I many naval aviators, chafing in a climate characterized by overemphasis on traditional approaches to combat and power projection, championed creation of a separate service which they could—and later did—join with the establishment of the RAF in 1918.

It is false to assert that Britain produced "lower quality" aircraft in the interwar period than did America, that the RAF was the "repository of all post-1918 aviation assets," that the RAF "did not have an ethos of experimentation," and that the rationale for the RAF "depended on maintaining and selling its fixed vision of strategic bombing."

Before the United States entered World War II, Britain fielded excellent aircraft (such as the Spitfire, Mosquito, and Sunderland) and developed the Whittle and Merlin engines. It had a robust aviation infrastructure that supported military, commercial, and industrial requirements, including a worldwide export market.

Pre-war RAF leaders, far from being limited by a strategic bombing mindset, were open to innovative uses of airpower, some of which (such as air control and presence operations) are still with us. Indeed, if the RAF had been so constrained, it could not have waged the Battle of Britain.

Whatever problems the Royal Navy faced in the field of aviation during the interwar years, they cannot be attributed to the RAF; rather, they stemmed from the naval culture of the day.

—Richard P. Hallion
Air Force Historian

To the Editor—The articles on the evolution of carrier aviation by Jan van Tol posed important questions about military innovation. Concerning his point on why experiments with multi-carrier strike forces were not conducted, I would offer the following observations.

First, the lethality of a carrier strike against enemy carrier forces was overestimated. Prior to World War II, aviators assumed that a deckload strike could sink several carriers at once; but in reality it took a carrier air group to sink another carrier. Dispersal was seen as key to carrier force survivability. It made multi-carrier operations infeasible while maintaining radio silence. Because no one was willing to give up on surprise, this option was rejected.

Second, during the time carrier tactics were being developed at the Naval War College there was no effective way of detecting enemy strikes at long range. The solution (radar) did not appear until just before the United States entered World War II. The sudden shift in tactics contributed to the general confusion produced by unbloodied units fighting for the first time. As a result, it took time for the proper tactics to develop.

It is worth noting that American naval aviation, though it experienced teething problems in the first year of the war, rapidly adapted to a changed environment. Surface warfare counterparts, by comparison, were much less able to develop the new tactics made both possible and necessary by an unexpected operating environment.

—Kenneth Prescott
San Diego, California

THE FRICTION OF HISTORICISM

To the Editor—Just because Williamson Murray bloviates in the face of profound change (*JFQ*, Autumn/Winter 1997-98) doesn't mean we should ignore some of the questions that lie beneath his rhetoric. One is the proper role of history—or more accurately, a certain historian's view of what transpired in the past—in thinking about the future.

That it can be dangerous to "jump into the future" without "an understanding of history" is hardly debatable. Of course, such an understanding and how it either helps or hinders one's ability to influence the future is another matter. Dismiss Murray's assertion that the French army and air force, British army, Royal Navy, U.S. Air Corps, and Italian army, navy, and air force all "jumped into the future without reference to the past" as quaint hyperbole. (He knows that debates during the inter-war years in those institutions were as well larded with appeals to historical authority as today's.) His more notable point is the demand for accurate references to history if designers of future militaries are to "get it right." That is, after all, the essential rule of historicism, for without acknowledging that there really are differing explanations of the past, those who are less interested in gazing backward have little use for historians. Despite his tirade, some of Murray's work leads one to suspect that in more serious, less propagandistic moments he could

point to historical cases in which failing to quickly and profoundly change resulted in the catastrophe that he fears. History doesn't dictate against rapid and sometimes radical change. Bureaucracy, arrogance, complacency, smugness, and dogma do.

This raises another issue: how should we think about change over the next decade or so? Here again there may be disagreement between Murray's rhetoric and reality, for one suspects that he understands how nonsensical it is to claim, as he does, that current assets "in light of today's strategic environment will be needed over the next twenty to thirty years." Such assets reflect what was needed, built, and honed in a strategic environment that has waned. They were not designed for today and certainly not for 2025. That is why there is unanimous agreement (unless Murray really believes we must freeze our assets for three decades) that the Armed Forces need to change, and close to unanimity that they ought to change in the direction the *revolutionaries* advocate. The debate is not about the requirement to change. It is about the rate of change.

That being the case, it is curious that Murray sees a disconnect between my call for debate, experimentation, and reasoned discussion on the one side and speculative projection about a force structure (circa 2007) on another which might result if the Nation decided to accelerate the change. It appears that those who promote faster change must spell out details on the structural implications of their views and support honest, extensive tests and experiments to determine if they are correct. The alternative is to be vague about what could be done and resist testing and experimentation. But even the good professor would reject that approach. Wouldn't he?

—James R. Blaker
Science Applications
International Corp.